Youth Empowerment through Urban Agriculture: Red Hook Community Farm

Interview with Ian Marvy

Added Value, Brooklyn, NY

Lindsay Campbell: What is the main goal of Added Value and the Red Hook Community Farm?

What we're trying to do here is create a more sustainable world; the way we want to do that is through youth empowerment and urban agriculture. We are taking public space that was programmed for one use, one economy, and one social structure, and transforming it into something else. What we believe we're doing as an organization and a learning community is transforming what was a 20th century park into a 21st century park — literally a public commons.

What a 21st century park means to us is that we can use a public space to educate people about a truly democratic process: how to care about social issues. We can provide them with skills development and training to help build that world, while simultaneously building an economic process that nurtures the community and nurtures the environment. It doesn't just lessen the ills that we've done. This is a project that harvests waste from the surroundings to generate nutrients, to generate ideas and energy. Often when we think about our work, we talk about words like: catalytic, inspirational, transformative, community.

I'm not really interested in any of my teens becoming farmers. What I care about is that they grow up caring. They know they're cared for. They know that caring matters. They have skills to help them articulate that and actualize that in terms of building a more caring world. Hopefully they can share that with other people. That's what this kind of space and this kind of program can do.

Previous Page:
Youth working at Red Hook Farm, Brooklyn, NY.
PHOTO USED WITH PERMISSION BY ADDED VALUE

Left:
Ian Marvy teaches composting with youth visitors to the farm.
PHOTO USED WITH PERMISSION BY ADDED VALUE

Anne Wiesen: I think I understand your vision of a 21st century park, but what do you mean by a 20th century park?

The public playground movement in the United States began out of Clark College and was focused on child development and related to the new immigration at the turn of the last century. The first head of the American Playground Association was involved with the development of most of the public parks here in New York City — the playgrounds, not the large-scale parks like Van Courtland, **Central Park**, Prospect Park — we're talking about the parks that the vast majority of working class people use. Those parks were designed as places to get the poor out of their tenements, get them physically active, and get them healthy. They were also talked about as citizenship projects and *civilizing* projects. Sandboxes were a place where children returned to primordial soup. Then they progressed to small ball games and little climbing structures so that children could develop their own relationship with the built environment. That then moved onto shared games and play — sports activities. Those sports activities were primarily written about as citizenship cultivation, and in particular citizens in a 20th century economic order. So, you needed to learn how to play the left fullback or the third baseman or whatever it was because you needed to know where to pop a rivet. You needed to know where you would be in the economic order. You needed to know how to follow rules, team play, and how your play contributed to the overall good as defined by those in charge. What we're sitting on here was a baseball field and a football field that was flooded in the winter to become an ice skating rink.

→ SEE MARTENSEN PAGE 26

LC: Why the name Added Value?

Added Value took its name from the system of energy transfer that begins with the sun and creates energy that go into plants that are then harvested by animals of all different varieties and then reharvested by decomposers, and that whole cycle. Unfortunately, what's very unique about human beings is that we have to choose to "add value" to that cycle. We have created ourselves as extractive people that pull away from that system. We've built a society and an economy that drag resources out of that cycle. What Michael Hurwitz and I want to suggest is that we could inspire people to make the choice to add value by working with teens and working with food.

LC: So, why focus on urban agriculture?

Food is something every person has a connection to and young people are something that everybody has a connection to. And often both of them are things that people have strong opinions about, they care about them.

Prior to running Added Value I was doing a **restorative justice** project with Michael Hurwitz, working with first time youth offenders in a community garden. One day I pulled a dandelion green out of the ground and got into a long discussion with a teenager about culturally appropriate food — he wasn't interested. Healthy eating — he wasn't interested. Good cooking — he wasn't interested. He wasn't interested in any of the typical models of education and inspiration that we might deal with. What he was interested in was growing dandelion greens in a 10 foot x 10 foot space and selling his produce at a $1.75/pound. I told him — hypothetically — he could make $75 on this space of land for very little investment. Then I talked to him about what would it mean to grow dandelion roots instead of dandelion greens. Dandelion root is a medicinal plant that supports kidney and liver function. So, we grow roots for a year, clean them off, chop them up, soak them in alcohol, and let them cure for a year. And at the same time we do some education in the community about our own health and wellness. And then we turn around and in the same plot of land we have $1,200 worth of dandelion

→ SEE JILER PAGE 178

Teen participants work the farmers market.
PHOTO USED WITH PERMISSION BY PHIL SHIPMAN, ADDED VALUE

What a 21st century park means to us is that we can use a public space to educate people about a truly democratic process: how to care about social issues. We can… build an economic process that nutures the community and nurtures the environment.

Red Hook Farm
PHOTO USED WITH PERMISSION
BY PHIL SHIPMAN, ADDED VALUE

root tincture that we can sell below market value to our neighbors. Now, this kid's no dummy, his family sells heroin and he knows what economic systems look like. He knows what supply and demand look like. And he knows what health and lack of health look like. He asked me for a job doing exactly what we had just discussed, but I didn't have a job to give him. At that point, Added Value did not exist.

LC: How did you identify your site?

→ SEE BENNATON PAGE 232

We were working in a **New York City Housing Authority** community garden, and we knew that that wasn't going to be enough space. And we were running a farmers' market in a park not far from here. I was walking out to lunch with, Ben Balcolm, one of the farmers from our market and we walked past this site. I lived in the neighborhood, but I had never been here. It was a dilapidated, unused park. Ben said, "That's a great urban farm. You've got nice wind here, a nice wind break, you've got great southern exposure, a 12-foot fence, 2.5 to 3 acres, and it doesn't look like anything's going on there." Then we went off to lunch. I came back here and crawled through the fence and totally cried in the middle of the field. It was so much fun. I was like, "This is sweet!"

AW: Was the decision to build raised beds of soil on top of the asphalt out of concern for health or liability?

It was an economic decision at the time. This is formerly a railroad change yard for the docking station, which — relatively speaking — is a nontoxic use as far as industry goes. It's just to change cars. It wasn't a loading and unloading facility. So, relatively speaking, it was a clean site compared to the brownfields that are all around us. We've got 5 inches of cement and at that time Added Value had a budget of about $5,000. Tearing up the cement would have cost $140,000 and I can get compost for free.

LC: Who do you target with your programs?

The core of our work has always been teenagers. That's in large part because that's what Michael and I did for 10 years before we started Added Value, both of us were youth workers. The staff that we have hired are also all primarily youth workers. Typically 17 to 20 teens are somehow involved in the project.

How does the history of Red Hook shape your current work?

This park was built in an immigrant, Irish and Italian, neighborhood. Those Irish and Italian families worked out here on the docks when there were 50,000 families living in this neighborhood and probably more working in it. The docks did two things: they either brought food from the other world, primarily bulk products; or they built and rebuilt the boats that were doing that work or supporting the colonial endeavors of the 20th century.

With a few major public policy decisions in this neighborhood, city, and state, this community was killed. The city decided not to have maritime industry be part of its economic future, and obviously that was the economy that was here. Simultaneously, Robert Moses was involved with his design projects, which included the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway and the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel. These were constructed at the same time and cut the neighborhood off from the rest of the community leading to the destruction of the economic engine and the physical isolation of the neighborhood.

Then you had the GI Bill—essentially a Marshall Plan for the United States. You send all these people off to war and they come back traumatized. The economy had been entirely oriented toward the manufacturing of weapons and the food to feed people, and that economy was going to collapse. So we gave all these people housing loans, which meant they were going to build houses and we gave them free college—so those who couldn't get involved in the manufacturing industry building houses could go off to college and become teachers. It was an incredible asset to the country. But the military was segregated. So what we remember as the GI Bill was a massive transfer of wealth to white, working class people. It was a great thing; it was also disproportionate and created a large wealth gap. So the vast majority of the white community began to leave Red Hook to go off to Long Island to places where they could build homes and go off to college. So within a matter of 16 years, from 1947 to 1963, this community was gutted and left to suffer through urban blight.

In 1962 you started to see real urban decay coupled with urban renewal projects almost immediately. Essentially what you had in Red Hook in the late 1980s and early '90s is a community of 10,000 people, 8,400 of whom are living in public housing, with an average income of $12,000 for a family of four, which is half of the poverty line in New York City. So, amid that context, Added Value was formed out of concern about the way people were approaching Red Hook—defining its opportunities externally. There were all sorts of other people's dreams for this neighborhood. But without access to capital or education and a pro-social agenda that would allow people to make changes in their lives, all of those plans failed. They failed for a number of reasons, but primarily because they didn't help people *here* get educated, get involved, and improve their lives.

An adaptive strategy: building raised beds on top of the asphalt ballfield.
PHOTO USED WITH PERMISSION BY ADDED VALUE

Seed-to-Salad participant in the 2nd grade, harvesting the lettuce she planted. Each spring, first- and second-grade students participate in this 10-week program, sowing seeds in April, harvesting and eating a salad in June, and learning about plants, food, and farm life cycles.
PHOTO USED WITH PERMISSION BY JENNIE ALLEN

LC: What is your involvement with schools?

We work very intensively with three elementary schools. In the spring we work with 120 elementary school students for an hour and a half per week for 10 weeks on the farm. We work with Food Change with another 80 elementary school students on a 22-week, 3 hour/week curricula. We do an hour and a half in the classroom and an hour and a half on the farm.

PS 15 is the school we do the intensive program with, and we got a call from Trust for Public Land (TPL) this spring that said, "We have a problem." TPL has their commons project where they get large grants to develop NYC Department of Education playgrounds into more community-friendly places through a participatory design process with the kids in the schools and input from the community. I ask, "What's the problem?" They said, "Well, the first-, second-, and third-graders are voting in a bloc for greenspace on the playground. They're voting for greenhouses, butterfly bushes, edible food gardens. More than a stage to perform on, more than a badminton court, more than a tennis court, more than a running track." So, given a choice, given the opportunity to participate actively in the design of their environment, children who were exposed to an inquiry-based farm and food learning experience were choosing the 21st century experience. They were choosing to have a garden where they could continue the inquiry, learning about seasons and cycles. So TPL had to change the design and we had to come to some compromises and say that we would help support it. A lot of the barriers are familiar: staffing, maintenance. It's harder to keep up a garden than it is to keep up a cement football field. It takes different resources.

AW: What is the relationship between your urban farm, other farms in the region, and global food sources?

Currently I don't think a fully local system works. I think an *ethic of localizing* might work. So, for example, we run a farmers' market. We don't just sell our own urban stuff because that wouldn't feed the needs of the community. And in some sense, it would not be able to have the impact that it does. But with four other farmers in the region dropping off their products, we get to build an urban-rural linkage. We get to recognize that an apple from Red Hook, New York — which is 60 miles

from here — is better than an apple from Washington state, which is better than apple juice from China — which is *ridiculous*.

AW: Would you tell us about the systemic impact of the farm at the neighborhood scale?

We've done a waste audit; we can handle a lot of compost here, a lot more than we have now. We take about 100 five-gallon buckets a week from one restaurant. We've just started what will hopefully be an all-urban Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). The CSA gets picked up in a 5-gallon bucket, you bring it home, the food scraps get brought back in the bucket, and then you get a new bucket. Also, we work with three local restaurants, and all three of restaurants in this neighborhood are owned by people in this neighborhood. They purchase food from a not-for-profit in this neighborhood that hires teens through an internship program and pays those teens to grow food in the neighborhood. So a dollar spent at one of these restaurants stays in the neighborhood four times — or some portion of that dollar.

Economic and environmental systems like that used to exist everywhere and, by and large, they still exist in a lot of the world. But they exist less and less. Globalized economies hurt the purpose of the commons. They pull away from the commons. But having an economy where my children know the restaurateurs who buy their stuff, they can say hello to them on the street — that's a truly local economy. So that's the macro-vision, we do that right now. That's *common*-ality, that's common-*unity*, that's community, that's where it goes.

LC: You're *clearly* deeply committed to Red Hook as a neighborhood. Do you ever see yourself trying to replicate this model in other places?

We are replicating by example. There are 12,000 people here and I would rather personally know each one of them and have each one of them know the farm. That's just my personal bent. Institutionally, we're growing so fast and that growth is really about meeting the need right here. It wouldn't make any sense to try and replicate in other places.

Across the country, I think we're seeing groups like Added Value more and more. There was a reason that Added Value was a very unique organization 7 years ago, but we're a very un-unique organization now.

AW: What would your ideal vision be if you had the funds and had the choice about how to grow the farm?

We had a design charrette for the farm to think about what the farm would look like and, we're also going through a participatory strategic planning process. Heifer is leading it in large part because of, 1) their long-term understanding of the organizations successes and challenges; and 2) their holistic approach, which could be likened to whole-farm planning or whole-planning. It's very integrated. And the hope is that that will help us develop a 3 to 5 year plan.

Currently, the conceptual plan is to have a 4,000-square-foot building in the northwest corner, bermed under soil in the back and open facing due south, with classroom space, food processing space, and office space there. About 4,000 feet of greenhouse space with an integrated aquaponic system and growing environment. A 2,000-square-foot barn for small ruminants — chickens and rabbits. And then, a large-scale community composting facility in about 100,000 feet and another outdoor classroom kind of space. **Bioswales**, all the **groundwater and graywater** gets treated on site. A windmill on site. Its easy for that kind of building, we only need 47kw/h. We've done this whole survey, I can operate off of wind and sun here. But we'll put in a biofuel processor and a diesel boiler on site so we can be triple redundant. We should be totally off the grid. And, again, it's a citizenship project. It's not a farm or a classroom. All that has to be interpretable and interactive. You've got to be able to touch it, see it, feel it. As a first-grader — we have to have lessons to help them "get" power. You can't just have a windmill, that's boring.

→ SEE LACERTE PAGE 216

→ SEE MARSHALL AND HODA PAGE 164

Beyond the farm site, the Red Hook Houses is one of the greenest public housing developments in the city. Greenspace per person is quite high over there. I would *love* to build a farm there. I would *love* at some point for somebody to say, "Hey, instead of coming over here and buying my greens, why don't we take the center mall, which is four blocks long and 20 feet or maybe even 40 feet wide, and turn that into a community garden?" Our mission is to promote the sustainable development of Red Hook, not to develop the farm. The farm is the catalytic, inspirational, physical location for broader neighborhood change.

Is there a thinker, practitioner, movement, or body or work that personally inspires you or drives you?

Personally, I take my inspiration from a couple places. One is the kids in the community I live in. Currently, I have little kids knocking on my door at night asking if I can get them lemon sorrel. Most people don't know what lemon sorrel is, let alone Dominicans in a poor neighborhood in a public housing project. That, to me, is totally inspiring.

I draw inspiration from the space and the excitement that it gives other people. When people get onto this space, you can see them go "ah!" and they start making their own connections. Everybody's always got another idea for the space, which is awesome. We can't always respond to that, but to me that says that the potential is here on the planet and it is within people and they want to do it. That's great.

I draw a lot of inspiration from my staff and my colleagues, they teach me a lot.

Institutionally, Heifer International as an organization has a model that is respectful of people and the environment. At its best, it is very progressive and they tend to take account of issues of gender, equity, and environmental justice. In language and in impact—I know people who have been profoundly touched by Heifer International.

As a thinker, **Vandana Shiva**'s writing and personhood is inspirational. For me, the reason I say that is she writes in a way that my teens can read—and we're talking about kids that are 3 and 4 years under their reading level. As a thinker, as an activist, and as a person, I think she's an eloquent and lovely human being.

As a movement, I was really skeptical of Slow Food, to be honest, having come from the U.S. and experiencing it as a really elite institution. But I went to Tierra Madre—their biannual international gathering with 5,000 farmers from all over the world, with the vast majority of them from developing nations. I was touched, profoundly impacted by the insistence on human dignity and the dignity of the planet, and developing social and economic structures that preserve that.

→ SEE INTRODUCTION PAGE 11